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Elza Iborscheva
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

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Abstract
Among the challenges women around the world face today, one of the biggest is the masculinization of democracy, as it has been identified in the literature on women's empowerment and political representation. Expressed in the underlining "manly" face of the democratic transition, this social phenomenon is defined by an increasingly gendered political discourse, which is also ubiquitously masculine in tone and visual manifestation. In emerging democracies, democratization and marketization are, and by definition have been, launched to the detriment of women through an increased separation of the public and private spheres and a polarization of sex roles.

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Peeking Through the Looking Glass: A Comparative Analysis of Women, Politics and Media in Lebanon and Bulgaria

By Elza Ibroscheva | eibrosc@siue.edu

Among the challenges women around the world face today, one of the biggest is the masculinization of democracy, as it has been identified in the literature on women's empowerment and political representation. Expressed in the underlining "manly" face of the democratic transition, this social phenomenon is defined by an increasingly gendered political discourse, which is also ubiquitously masculine in tone and visual manifestation. In emerging democracies, democratization and marketization are, and by definition have been, launched to the detriment of women through an increased separation of the public and private spheres and a polarization of sex roles. In Eastern Europe, as Watson (1993) pointed out, "(t)he creation of a civil society and market economy . . . fundamentally entails the construction of a 'man's world' and the propagation of masculinism in the public sphere" (p. 472). This in turn has resulted in decreased functional representation of women in the structures of political power, diminishing their opportunity to participate directly in governing a diverse and pluralistic society.

Studies in the field of political science, sociology and gender have indicated that this trend has taken place in Eastern Europe, where the masculinization of democracy has been particularly visible in the political representation of women in the top echelons of power (Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2009; Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2011). A similar trend has been evident in the representation of women in the political structure of the Middle East, where women's participation has been limited by cultural and religious dogmas, which often stand in the way of a more visible presence of female power on the political and social front. In fact, as 2008 data from the International Women's Democracy Center shows, the average percentage of parliamentary seats occupied by women in the Middle East is a little over 9 percent, the lowest ranking among all the world's geographical regions.

Of particular interest in this region is Lebanon, which despite boasting one of the most democratic systems in the region still lacks full parity in the political rights of women. In fact, women in Lebanon, as Khatib (2008) argues, "are often perceived as enjoying a better status than their sisters in other Arab countries, whether economically, socially or politically" (p. 437). And even though Lebanese women obtained the right to vote in 1952, they are still restricted in exercising full participation rights by a number of bureaucratic obstacles, including required proof of elementary education for female voters (required for men). This trend may be seen as an outgrowth of the cultural peculiarities of the region; however, it is also associated with a whole set of alarming symptoms that threatened the political opportunities for women.

Several studies have examined women's opportunities for political participation in Lebanese politics (Khatib, 2008; Schulze, 1998; Joseph, 2000), but none of them have examined the role of the media in stereotyping the gender roles female politicians are expected to espouse. That is particularly curious in the case of Lebanon, where, as Khatib (2008) pointed out, the Lebanese media play a very important part in sustaining the "rosy picture" of the condition of women, "with a number of prominent female journalists like Maguy Farah, Gisele Khoury, and May Chidyac playing an active on-screen role in televised political debate programs" (p. 438).

Lebanon is also an interesting case study for examining gender and media for another reason: even before the establishment of Al-Jazeera and other popular TV networks that feature female reporters and anchorwomen, it was Lebanon that pioneered the presence of women in TV programs. As Sakr (2007) pointed out, LBC and Future TV, the two Lebanese satellite channels that started in 1996, "used women anchors in low-cut attire in a bid to woo Gulf audiences, who were unaccustomed to seeing women on their own television screens" (p. 94). Furthermore, as data from the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia report recently shows, Lebanon has the highest number of female journalists in the region, accounting for 40 percent of the entire media workforce.

So why is it important to turn to Lebanon to understand the dynamics of women's position in social and political life, as well as their potential to contribute to the governing of emerging democracies in the Middle East? Because women in new and transitional democracies face a formidable yet highly insidious obstacle in their struggles to assert a leading position in society—a ubiquitously growing gender bias in the media. Studies of politics, gender, and media dynamics worldwide reveal that media coverage of female politicians is more negative, tends to focus more on appearance than on issues, and, in general, reinforces deeply rooted social stereotypes (Kahn, 1994,1996; Herzog, 1998; Ross, 2000; Ross & Sreberny, 2000).

Given the similar context of transitional democracies—in the case of Bulgaria, from post-communism into democracy, and in the case of Lebanon, from civil war into Western-style democratic governance—this study looks at what part gender stereotypes play in the portrayals of female politicians in the Lebanese media. In doing so, it will explore the role of media in defining the gender discourse of politics, since media are to be understood both as social technologies for generating gender stereotypes and as institutions of power. As such, they implicitly espouse the ruling ideologies and fabricate effective matrices that legitimize themselves and maintain the status quo.

Such critical dissection is important because gender biases disseminated by the media can have incredibly important electoral consequences; at a time when politics is thoroughly mediatized, voters respond to candidates largely in accordance with information (and entertainment) received from the media. Media, and specifically journalists, play a very important role in framing the discursive metaphors that define the political process and therefore contribute significantly to defining the political and social positioning of women (Ibroscheva, 2009; Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2009). It will be interesting to see whether the media play a similar role in Lebanon, where the role of women in political and social life continues to evolve and can potentially lead to a fundamental transformation of traditional cultural norms and societal gender relations.

Theoretical framework

Gidengil and Everitt (1999) identify three phases in the study of women, politics and media, beginning with visibility/invisibility (typified by Tuchman, 1978), then moving to the narrow focus in coverage of female politicians, and finally into "gendered mediation." The latter "shifts the focus ... to the more subtle, but arguably more insidious, form of bias that arises when conventional political frames are applied to female politicians" (p. 49). The gendered mediation thesis recognizes that media news frames are far from neutral in treating female politicians and that they treat the male as the norm (Gidengil & Everitt, 1999). This bias often

transpires in language used by reporters to cover women in politics, the presence of which is often trivialized by the female politicians themselves, who often see this bias as an integral and normal side of the political process (Ross, 2002; Ross & Sreberny, 2000).

The gendered mediation thesis rests on the assumption that the way politics is reported is significantly determined by a male-oriented agenda that privileges the practice of politics as an essentially male pursuit. The image and language of mediated politics, therefore, "supports the status quo (male as norm) and regards women politicians as novelties" (Ross & Sreberny, 2000, p. 93). The gendered nature of news can be traced to the "gendered structure of news production" (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 43). Indeed, television news has been likened to a "masculine soap opera" (Fiske, 1987, p. 308), constructing politics as if it were a battle, a boxing match, or a horserace. As such, the news is not simply reflecting the fact that politics is still very much a man's world; it is playing an active role in perpetuating a stereotypically masculine conception of politics and politicians (Rakow & Kranich, 1991; Sreberny & van Zoonen, 2000).

Part of the problem of female politicians' media profile, and therefore part of the answer, lies in the political economy of the newsroom (see Meehan & Riordan, 2002; Bourdeau, 1998), and in the fact that most newsrooms are dominated by men. As Carter et al. (1998) point out, "feminist gender-sensitive studies of journalism are becoming increasingly concerned with the changing of news media ownership [especially] within local, national and global contexts" (p. 3).

Another paradox is that the news profession, especially in countries in transition, is feminized to such a great degree—clearly the case in Lebanon—from which it follows that the stereotypical representations of women in media are often the fault of women themselves. Yet one should not forget that journalism is the oldest media profession and that the founding myths and skills that bring journalistic glory usually affirm a patriarchal culture of masculinity. Consequently, the socialization of women and their education can by no means be neglected (Tuchman, 1978).

Women and politics in Lebanon

Despite many strides that Lebanese women have made, including higher educational levels and participation rates in business ownership and other leadership position, Lebanon is at the bottom of the table of parliamentary representation of women in the Middle East, with only 3.1 percent of seats now occupied by women. That figure puts Lebanon down with conservative Gulf states like Oman (none), Yemen (0.3 percent) and Bahrain (2.7 percent), whereas neighboring Syria has 12.4 percent and Tunisia has 22.8 percent. Iraq has a 25 percent quota for women.

Analysts and political commentators argue that Lebanon's 1975-90 civil war, which destroted many democratic practices, and other domestic tumults slowed political advancement for women, mostly because the volatilities of sectarian political culture came before women's rights. In reality, Lebanese women have been in parliament since 1992. Women won three seats in that year's elections, accounting for 2.3 percent of the seats. This was the first time women arrived in Parliament, and it constituted a fundamental transformation.

Another important cultural trend is the fact that women in Lebanon regularly come to power in mourning clothes, stepping into a seat vacated by an assassinated father or spouse. As Al-Rahbani (2009,¶4) explained, women nominated for political office are selected "on the basis of nepotism, familial political legacies, and martyred relatives." Examples include former Minister of Industry Leila Solh, daughter of former Lebanese Prime Minister Riad Solh and aunt of the billionaire Prince Walid Bin Talal of Saudi Arabia; former Minister of Health Wafaa Hamza, a Shiite close to the Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri; and Nayla Moawad, widow of former president Rene Moawad, the Social Affairs minister in the former government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora; and Nayla Tueni, at 26 the youngest elected female MP and daughter of Gibran Tueni, a former MP and editor of the daily An Nahar, who was killed in 2005.

This situation is not entirely different from the path by which women in the top echelons of power under communism have tended to find political success. As Ibroscheva and Raicheva (2011) contended in their examination of the coverage of Bulgarian women in politics under communism, it was not at all unusual to see female politicians' familial connections, especially to powerful male functionaries of the Communist Party, strongly emphasized in press coverage. Masked as simple family profiles, the articles in the Communist press about the candidate's path to political awareness tended to stress the importance of the female candidate's father and his contribution to the communist revolution, rather than examining her personal characteristics that might qualify her to represent the people. What is even more, as Ibroscheva and Raicheva-Stover further contend, this pictures did not change as communism fell apart and democracy was ushered in. On the contrary, now the stories of familial bonds so common during communism were transformed into stories of mothers-turned-politicians, or the stories of the political wives of influential husbands, whose careers blossomed because of their spouses' success as leaders of the democratic revolution.

In both Lebanon and Bulgaria, then, it appears that, regardless of how women's political role is conceived, women in politics were portrayed in the media as offshoots of their family environment, often described as "loyal daughters, able wives, and devoted mothers," further stressing the importance of their proven political pedigree as evidence of their potential to carry out their political duties. In Lebanon, and to some extent in the case of communist Bulgaria, the essence of the woman per se was defined through some connection to the men in her family, where she is also expected to cater, implicitly or explicitly, to the interests of men—fathers, brothers, husbands, sons—sometimes to the detriment of her own intrinsic interests. As Joseph and Slyomovics (2001) pointed out:

> The relational construct of self is encouraged in both men and women (although other notions are also supported). The implications for women, however, are somewhat different from those of men … Women, more than men, are expected to put others before themselves and to see their interest as embedded in those of others, especially familial others. In practice this means that women are particularly encouraged to see their interests linked to their male kin. This often has the effect of reinforcing patriarchal hierarchy (p. 7).

In the political realm, the need to recognize and reinforce patriarchal hierarchy is not only further justified by the unwritten rules of the cultural construction of gender in the Middle East, but also further solidified by an attempt to justify politics as an exclusively

male terrain, frequently described as unsafe, unfitted and unwelcoming to women. As Al-Rahbani (2009) contended, "Most party leaders hold a view that women are inferior, and they limit the presence of women to the second and third ranks of the parties and refrain from appointing women to positions within their inner circles even if her aptitude and her superior over her male counterparts is clearly demonstrated" (¶17).

This sentiment was echoed recently by Otaibi and Thomas (2011) in their study of women, politics and the media in Bahrain. While the authors noted that generally the media served as a positive environment fostering a climate of acceptance of women's participation in the political process, the media also frequently stereotyped women by portraying them essentially as superficial and one-dimensional, and therefore, incapable of making rational decision about who should be elected to office.

Lebanese Female Politicians in the News

The outcome of the 2009 elections dealt a terrible blow to the advancement of women's political participations. Essentially, only four female MPs were elected to Lebanon's unicameral legislative body, Majlis Alnuwab: Nayla Mouawad, Solange Gemayel, Nayla Tueni, and Sethrida Geagea. Ironically, they don't seem to be considered a novelty act in the eyes of Lebanese reporters but, on the contrary, enjoy a definite place in the public limelight. In fact, they are treated like household names, largely because of their long-standing position in domestic politics and their family ties.

More problematic than the low female representation in parliament has been the fact that, unlike prior governments, the newly formed cabinet had no women appointed in any capacity or position of executive power. That is not to say that there have been no women in the Lebanese government. The first woman appointed to a government was Leila Solh Hamadeh, daughter of Lebanon's first Prime Minister, Riad Solh; she served as industry minister from 2004 to 2005. Saad Hariri's previous national consensus government had two female members: Raya Haffar Hassan, the first female minister of finance, and Mona Afeish, minister of state.

However, it must be noted that female politicians are rarely expected to make their own, independent ascent into the echelons of power, free of any family or sectarian connections, and when they do, they are still framed by the media in fairly predictable gender-mediated terms. For example, when Hassan's story was reported in the media, she was often referred to as the "mother of three" or "42-year-old mother," as if her qualifications to solve financial problems are only to be understood in direct correlation to her ability to raise three children at a fairly young age.

And while women are to be celebrated for their ability to juggle family life and maintain professional careers in a male-dominated terrain such as finance, male politicians, on the other hand, are rarely, if ever, portrayed as father figures or in terms of their responsibilities as head of the household. For example, when Saad Hariri stepped into politics, following in the footsteps of his father, the slain former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, media portrayals focused on his business background as the head of a business empire, as well as his past of a "playboy," transforming "himself from a rich and inarticulate young man into a much more seasoned and assertive politician" (Antelava, 2009, ¶10).

Gender bias against female politicians is not, however, just a matter of how the media outlets handle the issue. The general sense of suspicion as to a woman's ability to carry out her duties as a deputy or a minister is frequently found in the cultural constructs and legitimization of power, which almost exclusively assume political leadership as a masculine domain. Those cultural constructs are articulated by male politicians themselves, who not only perpetuate the stereotype of the female politician as an inept novice in need of guidance and patronage from a more established, usually male, figure of authority, but also try to rationalize their gender-biased way of viewing female politicians as an act of exercising political wisdom. A particularly illustrative case in point comes from one of the most influential players on the current political scene in Lebanon, General Michel Aoun. General Aoun, who has had a long run in Lebanese politics as a leader of the Christian forces during the Civil War, returned from exile in France in 2005 when Syrian troops, who defeated him earlier and forced him to flee in the first place, withdrew from Lebanon, ushering a new era in Lebanese politics.

In 2006, Aoun reappeared on the political scene as the head of the Free Patriotic Movement, striking an unexpected accord with the Lebanese resistance Hezbollah, and promising the country a fresh start by stamping out corruption. Aoun's party and his political ally Hezbollah were the clear winners of the 2009 parliamentary elections, creating a wider political coalition, named March 8th, which earned them a majority rule with 68 out of the 128 seats, none occupied by women. What is even more, as the leader of the Change and Reform Bloc, Aoun was instrumental in negotiating the current assembly of the Lebanese government, naming 11 ministers; once again, none were women. Questioned by journalists about the total absence of female representation in the new government, Aoun responded: "We did not have any women candidates to nominate, but we welcome their opinions. My house is full of women, and I am very popular among the female population."*

By comparing the role of women in the Lebanese cabinet with that of his own household, Aoun not only diminished the legitimacy of women as equal players in exercising political power, but also symbolically reinforced the already established stereotype that women fare much better as "leaders" in taking care of family responsibilities than they would in making political decisions. To further trivialize the critically important contribution women can offer to solving political problems, Aoun added: "You all know that women in Lebanon need more practice and experience in the public life so that she may become qualified for parliamentary and ministerial work" (quoted by Moawad in "Situation of Lebanese Women," June 15, 2011). As Nadine Moawad, a Lebanese blogger and feminist activist, pointed out, "Aoun's comments – like all of his counterparts – show that the ruling elite have no awareness whatsoever of the importance of women's political participation. To say that there are no qualified women (out of a population of 2 million) is extremely offensive" (ibid.).

Aoun's remarks can easily be dismissed as crude Lebanese humor, but they could also be interpreted as an exercise in cultural chauvinism, not entirely uncommon in the cultural climate of the Middle East. In fact, the tendency to trivialize and patronize Lebanese women and their role in the political process is not new to Aoun and his political party. To make matters even worse, the media often scrutinize the very few female MPs in an unflattering fashion, focusing on their missteps in their political careers, rather than highlighting their work and contribution to solving political problems.

For more on the story, see http://www.yalibnan.com/2011/06/14/aoun-we-did-not-have-an-women-candidates-to-nominate/.

A particularly glaring example of this trend comes from a news report that originally aired on New TV and quickly found itself in wide circulation on the Internet. In it, Nayla Mouawad and Solange Gemayel are shown stuffing their purses with candy during a formal political function, while male MPs, seen in the background, appear engaged in important political conversation. While these types of etiquette faux pas always seem to capture the media's hungry eye for sensation and often feature both female and male politicians in equally embarrassing moments of their careers, in the case of female politicians, whose media coverage by default is limited in scope, tone, and nature, this type of comprising report can have a much larger damaging impact.

A similarly embarrassing moment was captured in April 2011 when Czech President Vaclav Klaus was caught on camera stealing a pen during a formal signing ceremony. The TV clips also went viral, featuring Mr. Klaus carefully studying the pen during the speech only to put it nonchalantly in his pocket. The clips became so popular that most international networks, including CNN and BBC, also covered the incident as legitimate news. And while there are many parallels with the media mockery of the Lebanese female MPs caught "stealing candy," there are also some obvious distinctions. Klaus's pocketing of the pen was interpreted as misconstrued diplomatic protocol (in fact, a diplomatic etiquette expert on CNN justified Klaus's pocketing of the pen as an innocent mistake, since he is by protocol entitled to keep it), while Mouawad and Gemayel's stealing of the candy was seen as petty coquetry, "women as usual" type of behavior, which no one would recognize as potentially compromising the position of these politicians or, for that matter, try to explain.

While such views might appear to be frequently articulated without much public outrage, the trend becomes more disturbing when they become legitimized by Aoun, a powerful politician who also wields significant influence as the owner of one of the popular TV channels in Lebanon, OTV. (The name is short for Orange TV and comes from the color representing Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement.) OTV first began operating in 2007 and since then has become a legitimate and notable player in the Lebanese mediascape. To find out how reporters working for OTV felt about Aoun's opinions on women's lack of preparedness to handle themselves in politics, I interviewed Chirine Nasser, a female reporter for OTV. Nasser was well aware of Aoun's statements concerning the lack of female representation in the latest Lebanese cabinet and was honest in evaluating his responses as a "blow for women."

However, she was also quick to point out that the lack of women in political leadership is not simply a matter of gender inequality, but rather indicates a larger, systemic problem with the Lebanese political hierarchy, which almost by default demands covering the world of politics as an exclusively male place, where women are seen more as visitors than permanent residents. In addition, Nasser pointed out that, regardless of their lack of visible presence in the media, female politicians like Sethrida Geagea are equally skilled and charismatic as their male counterparts, if not even more. In fact, asked whether she considered Geagea's physical beauty a drawback or an advantage to her political career, Nasser said, "She is most importantly a skilled leader, but it certainly helps that she is noticeably beautiful."*

Conclusions

The current situation is clearly not favorable to the political positioning of Lebanese women. Not only are there fewer women MPs, but there are also no female ministers, virtually erasing their presence from the echelons of executive power. The decrease in women's

representation has been markedly notable, as al-Rahbani (2009) contended, leading to a considerable nose dive, from 34 female candidates in 2000 to just 14 in 2004, to 12 in 2009, accounting for less than two percent of overall candidates. Even more alarming is the fact that the newly appointed Lebanese government does not have a single female minister.

Although the complex political environment that has come to define Lebanon as an extremely volatile state can perhaps account for the dismal representation of women in political power, it must also be noted that both the media and the predominantly patriarchal political establishment—often in accord with each other—are also to blame. Michel Aoun's role comes to the fore as exemplary, both as what al-Rahbani calls "the male chauvinistic mentality" and as a glaring example of how members of the male political establishment can legitimize and normalize the absence of women in political power, using gender-mediated rhetoric and delivering it from their own media outlet. In the case of Aoun, OTV has become the network where his political ideology is articulated and his position as wielder of social and culture power is solidified. Confidently, he proclaimed, "No one has the right to question my OTV channel. Weekly questions for OTV officials will not be allowed."**

The dismissive and often implicitly condescending attitude toward women's place in Lebanese politics is without doubt a byproduct of the region's deeply ingrained patriarchy, but it must also be reflected through the eminent role family structure plays in Lebanese society. Not unlike communist Bulgaria, where women's positioning in the political realm was seemingly attributed to their democratic ascent to power when in fact it was possible mostly because of the woman's communist pedigree (usually directly related to her father's role in the socialist revolution), in Lebanon family ties seem to present the most powerful, indisputable qualification for the few female MPs currently in power. As Joseph and Slyomovics (2001) argue, family represents the most reliable network of support and at the same time, an insurmountable bastion of patriarchal power, denying access to the woman who wishes to enter the political field:

> For women, these continuities among family, civil society, and state mean that they confront patriarchy in every sphere . . . The outcome is that women and juniors must be embedded in familial relationships to make most effective use of the institutions in these spheres and are therefore subject to patriarchal norms and relationships even in public spaces. Yet most of women and juniors would argue for retention of these familial relationships because the ties also provide support (p. 5).

In this sense, the network of support provided either by familial relations or by institutional ties based on political kinship becomes critical in launching anyone's political career. In the case of Bulgarian women, that network of support was explicitly provided by the Communist Party, whose major goal was to propagate the participation of women in public life as a means of advocating gender equity. Thus, within the Bulgarian context, there was an engineered sense of solidarity, a political sisterhood, which was created and further promoted by the socialist ideology of female camaraderie. In Lebanon, while

**Sethrida Geagea was voted number ten on SPIKE's network list of the sexiest female politicians alive. For more, see http://www.spike.com/articles/2rigtb/the-top-10-sexiest-female-politicians-in-the-world.*
***For Aoun's remarks, see http://www.yalibnan.com/2010/06/01/aoun-not-with-me-slam-your-head-on-the-wall/#more-9370.*

women rally to one another's side when a national crisis ensues, that response is not always universal when it comes to exercising basic political rights, such as participating in governing the country. Though in Bulgaria the socialist female camaraderie was no more than a mask covering the realities of deeply rooted patriarchy, it served as a tool of political empowerment for women. That sense of collective empowerment, outside the family structure, is yet to be instilled among Lebanese women as part of their growing clout as political influencers.

The trend towards the masculinization of democracy in Bulgaria and Lebanon is expressed in the pre-eminence of macho-thinking and reinforced by a strong patriarchal tradition, often bordering on misogyny masquerading as crude political humor. This trend also stresses beauty as a paramount goal and motherhood as the most natural function for the woman in society. Thus it is not unusual to see female politicians portrayed in the media as wives and mothers, even when their public mention is based solely on their political position. This frame also reflects a wider discussion about how women can be social and sexual beings as well as mothers, housewives, and serious professional contributors, but the frivolous portrayals of female politicians in the media make it easy for their colleagues to label them vacuous and unfit for office.

Finally, the importance of forging strong relationships between female politicians and representatives of the media must be noted. In a country like Lebanon where the newsrooms are filled with talented female reporters and media professionals, these relationships can be critical in defining a woman's success or failure as a politician. However, as Al-Rahbani (2010) aptly points out, "the number of women working in the media is not an indication of their influence over content" (p. 21). It is alarming that the trend towards "feminizing" the journalistic profession— in Lebanon and Bulgaria—has failed to produce a lasting impact on the way political discourse is covered in the media.

This, might be explained by the existing political economy of the newsroom, which is intrinsically male-dominated and informed by the norms of the journalistic profession, often instilled in the minds of the young and eager female journalists by seasoned, well-established and, more often than not, male editors. In addition, as Abu-Fadil (2011, p. 26) points out, Lebanese media overall suffer from a "traditional inside-the-box mindset," which often hinders introducing radical changes in the way the media operate. For lasting change to take place in the political positioning of women in Lebanese society, the professional norms and expectations of the journalists themselves must be re-evaluated to delineate and remove any presence of gender bias or tendency to stereotypes whether conscious or unconscious.

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